

Learning Points – KO Balancing Gem

by Steve Moese; edited by Mike Purcell

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LEVEL: Intermediate/Advanced

W Deals

EW Vul

Hands rotated for convenience

♠	A. J.	
♥	Barbara	
♦		
♣		

Saturday May2, 2009. Cincinnati Flying Pig Regional at the Sharonville Convention Center. Compact Knockouts.

Here's a hand that would make anyone's top-10 "declare or defend" list for 2009. This gem showcases the growing prowess of Canada's and Southwest Ohio's up-coming duplicate players. We take you to the championship match for Compact Knockouts Flight 3 between an Ontario, Canada Toronto area Team (**Eamon Walsh, Natalie Silverstein, Mary Lovrics, Barbara Murray**) and a Dayton/Cincinnati Team (**A. J. Stephani, David Camillus, Ryan Schultz, Randall Rubinstein**). Congratulations to both the Champions and the Finalists. Special thanks to A. J., Randall, Mary and Barbara for this article. Mary and Barbara play at the Barbara Seagram's Bridge Club run by Barbara Seagram and Alex Kornel in Toronto Canada (416) 487-8321. Randall & A. J. play at the Cincinnati Bridge Association (513) 631-8070

♠	N		♠
♥	W		♥
♦	E		♦
♣	S		♣

Mary	♠ AJ987x	Randall
	♥ xx	
	♦ A10xx	
	♣ J	

West	North	East	South
2N	Pass	Pass	??

Bidding

West picks up this hand with revenge in mind as she eyes her 20 HCP count. Her side had just allowed a vulnerable 6♦ Doubled +6 for -1540 on the very 1st board of the championship match. She opens the bidding with 2NT, looking for payback. North has an interesting hand, but no compelling reason to interfere in second seat. After a pause and a sigh, East passes.

What do you do holding South's cards?

South makes a reflexive start toward the bidding box, but then stops, rubs his chin, and decides to balance with 3♣. After all, he thinks, he's not vulnerable, and how bad can this go wrong?

West drops her jaw in disbelief - what chutzpah! - and passes reluctantly. Everyone readies their pass-tapping fingers.

Now the spotlight turns to North. Hearing partner make a very rare balancing 3♣ bid, *do you bid or pass?*

After a brief pause, North decides that his side doesn't play in part scores this round. 4♠ !! North's game bid was passed out.

W Deals

EW Vul

The full deal.

♠ 10xx	A. J.	
♥ AK10xx	Barbara	
♦		
♣ 10xxxx		

♠ KQ6	N		♠ x
♥ Qx	W		♥ Jxxx
♦ KJxx	E		♦ Q9xxx
♣ AKQx	S		♣ 9xx

Mary	♠ AJ987x	Randall
	♥ xx	
	♦ A10xx	
	♣ J	

West	North	East	South
2N	Pass	Pass	3♣!
Pass	4♠!!	Passed Out	
Opening Lead: ♣A			

W Deals

EW Vul

Hands rotated for convenience

♠	A. J.	
♥ xx	Barbara	
♦ -		
♣ 10		

♠ KQ6	N		♠
♥	W		♥
♦	E		♦ Q9x
♣	S		♣

Mary	♠ AJ9	Randall
<i>Play is in dummy.</i>	♥	<i>West has no good answer.</i>
	♦	
	♣	

The Play

West's ♣A opening lead wins and declarer ruffs the ♣K at trick 2. Clearly the best path to 10 tricks is to score as many trumps separately as possible. The ♦A was followed by a ♦ ruff. Declarer cashed the ♥AK and ruffed a ♣ back to hand. ♦ ruff, ♣ ruff, ♦ ruff. At trick 11, declarer is in dummy with a rare trump end-play. Declarer led the ♣10 and ruffed with the ♠9. Whether West ducks or over-ruffs, South will win 2 of the last three tricks! 4♣ making 5 scored +450. At the other table, West also opened 2NT. East raised to 3NT. North led the ♥AK, setting up declarer's 9th trick. Making 3NT for East/West, a 1050 point swing (14 IMPs) on the way to a victory in the Flight 3 Compact KO Championship.

Post Mortem

When planning a cross-ruff as declarer, always cash all your winners not needed for transportation before you begin to ruff. If you don't, you risk the opponents discarding cards from your strong suits. They then might ruff winners you were counting on.

South's distribution and prime values in the pointed suits are enticing. Since South can count 30-31 of the possible 40 HCP, it is possible that partner might have one useful prime card, preferably in a pointed suit. Favorable vulnerability makes balancing attractive.

North reasons that partner must have a 6+ card suit and a singleton or void to balance in the face of great strength. That means North-South have a 9+ card ♠ fit. With 2 quick tricks in ♥ and a working void, North's hand could be worth 5 tricks in a trump contract. If partner can provide 4-5 tricks then 4♠ is either a worthy sacrifice or has an outside chance to make.

Do you choose to declare or defend??

On defense, cashing more ♣s is very tempting to West, but not best. The inference that North and South are bidding on useful shortness is strong. Perhaps the fall of the ♣J at trick 1 should persuade West to switch to trumps at trick 2. If declarer false cards from ♣J(xx), the extra ♣ loser(s) will not go away. Only ♥s offer a possible source of tricks (to pitch losing ♣s), but ♥s must split 3-3 between declarer and partner (unlikely here). If West switches to a trump at trick 2 and can lead another trump later to kill 2 ruffs in dummy, declarer will always fail. However, the trump switch at trick 2 comes too late on best play by declarer. Declarer can now cross ruff winning 1♦, 2♦ ruffs, 5♠ & 2♥ for 10 tricks!!

Instead, West should lead trumps 1st & at every opportunity. Each trump West leads eliminates 1-2 trump tricks for declarer (who will cross-ruff). No matter if West gives up a ♠ winner. Leading the ♠K unravels the cross ruff. If declarer tries to establish ♥ instead of ♣, → West will (over) ruff the 3rd ♥ and lead a 3rd trump. Now declarer can get to dummy only once more, and can't set up either ♥ or ♣. Declarer must lose 2♦s, 1♣ and 1♠ for down 1. (If declarer pitches a losing ♣ on the 3rd ♥, West ruffs low and declarer loses 2♠s, 1♣ and 1♥ – down 1). Note East must hold up the ♥J until the 4th round so declarer cannot profit from the good 5th ♥ in dummy. This hold up creates entry issues for declarer. East should find this play. Partner has only 2♥ since the ♥Q fell on the 2nd ♥ trick.

W Deals	♠ 10	A. J.	
EW Vul	♥ 10x	Barbara	
<i>Trick 5 after one ♥ ruff</i>	♦		
	♣ 10xxxx		
♠	N		♠
♥	W		♥ J
♦ KJxx		E	♦ Q9xxx
♣ AKQx	S		♣ 9x
Mary	♠ J98	Randall	
	♥		
	♦ A10xx		
	♣ J		

W Deals	♠	A. J.	
EW Vul	♥ 10x	Barbara	
	♦		
	♣ 10xx		
♠	N		♠
♥	W		♥ J
♦ KJx		E	♦ Q9xx
♣ KQ	S		♣
Mary	♠ J9	Randall	
	♥		
	♦ 10xx		
	♣		

If declarer instead surrenders the ♣J early to ruff ♣s in hand, West can clear dummy's trumps leading to a less advantageous position. Now ← the 5-card ending shows no squeeze against West and 3♦ losers must accrue. South also loses 1♠ & 1♣ for down 2.

Once a trump is led at trick 1 or 2, declarer's best hope is that ♥ are 3-3 or ♠ are 2-2. Since neither occur declarer will fail 1 trick (best play).

A NS score of -50 or -100 results in an 11 IMPs gain on this board. North-South are right to balance and to attempt a game. If partners find only the NT partial, NS will still gain 1-3 IMPs.

Yes, you should choose to defend. In fact doubling might be the only way to avoid a loss... a high stakes decision. Are you up to it?

Balancing

Balancing is a competitive attempt to create a positive score by either raising the level of the opponent's contract or playing in one of our side's 8+ card fits. Balancing auctions occur frequently at the 1 or 2 level in non-forcing auctions. A balancing bid is a bid made by the defender whose pass would otherwise end the auction. Generally defenders balance when opponents have bid weakly and have found a fit. When opponents have bid strongly or have bid 3 or 4 suits, it is less wise to balance. We might push them to a game they wouldn't ordinarily reach, and we are less likely to have a productive 8-card fit.

Balancing is a complex competitive tactic. The objective of balancing is to improve the defender's prospects for a positive score. Balancing rarely leads to game. Competitive bidding after opponents open a strong 2NT (20-21 HCP balanced hand) is rarer still. Little exists in bridge literature about this specific situation. Why? Because balancing in the face of great strength often leads to negative results (and upset teammates).

Working Points (WP) – Suit Contract Hand Evaluation with Singletons and Voids

Working Points is a good way to evaluate the NS hands in a suit contract. Working Points are high cards in suits where we have length in BOTH hands. Points opposite voids are not working. Opposite singletons only the Ace of that suit is working.

Here high card points in \heartsuit don't contribute to the playing strength needed for game. Only the $\clubsuit A$ matters. North's \heartsuit void meant that only 30 WP were relevant, and South's \clubsuit singleton made only 24 WP relevant (only the $\clubsuit A$ counts) for the partnership. (Count WP: 40 HCP – 10 \heartsuit HCP – 6 \clubsuit HCP = 24 WP]

Of NS's combined 17 HCP, 16 were working (16 WP in long suits). $16 \text{ WP} / 24 \text{ WP} = 67\%$. A normal 10 trick game requires 26 HCP / 40 total HCP = 65%. If you can bid game on 26 HCP (65% out of 40 total) you can surely bid game on 16 WP - 67% of the 24 relevant for the game decision – as long as you have a viable fit.

The converse is also true. When holding much of your HCP opposite partner's announced singleton or void, be cautious. Partner is likely counting on those points in other suits. Not having them where partner wants them will make success very unlikely. Stop early with these wrong textured hands.

Learning Pointers:

- 1) Balancing is an effective tool in all forms of competitive bridge. In the hand above, controls, length and working points (effective shortness) enable South to offer partner a high scoring option.
- 2) When partner balances, avoid punishing them for pushing the auction up one level. At the same time be sensitive to the tricks your hand can deliver. Attend to the working points necessary based on shortness in BOTH hands when responding.
- 3) When defending against a boldly bid game holding half of the deck's points, you can conclude the opponents must be bidding on distribution. Lead a trump to cut down on the cross-ruff tricks. Each trump you lead can eliminate 2 tricks for declarer (one trump in each hand). Leading a trump when opponents hold a singleton or void is one of the 1st leads you should consider as you diagnose how to start your defensive campaign.